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ABSTRACT

This reports provides local governments with guidelines and suggestions for selecting a Records Management Officer to develop, organize, and direct a records management program. Such a program is described as an over-arching, continuing, administrative effort that manages recorded information from its initial creation to its final disposition. This includes disposing of obsolete records; setting up filing and indexing systems; using modern computer technology in information creation, manipulation, and storage; storing inactive records securely and cost effectively; microfilming selected paper records for security, ease of access, space consideration, and preservation of important information; overseeing the creation and use of forms, correspondence, and other records; and identifying, appraising, and preserving records of archival value. The benefits of appointing a Records Management Officer, the administrative relationships involved, and the responsibilities of the officer are discussed. (DB)

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State Archives and Records Administration
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The Records Management Officer in Local Government

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BASIC RECORDS MANAGEMENT
FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Records Management Officer In Local Government

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THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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Introduction

This information leaflet provides local governments with guidelines and suggestions for selecting a Records Management Officer to develop, organize, and direct a records management program. A records management program is an over-arching, continuing, administrative effort that manages recorded information from initial creation to final disposition. It includes systematically disposing of obsolete records; setting up filing and indexing systems; using modern computer technology in information creation, manipulation and storage; storing inactive records securely and cost efficiently; microfilming selected paper records for security, ease of access, space consideration, and preservation of important information; overseeing the creation and use of forms, correspondence, and other records; and identifying, appraising, and preserving records of archival value.

Advantages of a Records Management Program

Records document policies, decisions, and alternatives, and provide continuity with past operations. They illustrate the evolution of government and its services such as law enforcement, health care, and public works. Records reflect the interaction between government and individuals, document governmental activities, and protect the rights of citizens. Good record keeping ensures open gov-

ernment, which promotes more confidence in public officials and greater accountability in the use of public funds.

Programs to manage records provide several advantages for local government. They save government resources and, in turn, taxpayers' money. They ensure that files and records are systematically arranged in such a way that minimal staff time is spent in costly searches for valuable information. They assist with the identification, retention, and availability of permanently valuable records.

An exemplary records management program is one that is anchored in enabling legislation. Such legislation firmly establishes the government's lasting commitment to an ongoing systematic records program, and provides a firm legal basis by which the records program may operate.

Benefits of Appointing a Records Management Officer

A records management program can and should be an important part of local government. Section 57.19 of the Local Government Records Law requires local governments to designate a Records Management Officer and outlines his/her responsibilities.To effectively organize and operate such a program, one person must be in charge for the following reasons:

- A successful records management program requires continued attention. A Records Management Officer provides that needed attention and expertise as well as standard procedures and guidelines for the handling of records, information retrieval, and preservation.
- The Records Management Officer is recognized throughout all levels of the local government as the official primarily responsible for the records management program. Government employees turn to this expert for assistance, which leads to more efficient offices and saves tax dollars.
- The Records Management Officer provides government officials with continuous expert advice relating to the disposition of obsolete records, preservation

of archival records, and development and use of modern office technologies such as microfilming and computerization.

Administrative Relationships

Placing the Records Management Officer administratively as near as possible to the official or department exercising the greatest power and authority over all other departments is the ideal situation. Support from top management should encourage compliance with the established goals of the records management program from all offices and departments.

Once the local government has made the commitment to create the position of Records Management Officer, the selection or appointment process may begin. With the help of the local government's Records Advisory Board, criteria should be developed and a qualified Records Management Officer designated. The primary function of the Records Advisory Board is to provide the support and guidance a records management program requires, primarily during its initial phases. The Board's expertise and resources may be utilized in developing position descriptions, defining parameters of the Records Management Officer's authority, and developing policy.

Responsibilities of the Records Management Officer

Records management does not mean simply removing inactive records from over-crowded file cabinets once every few years, and then forgetting about them until the next time there's a problem. It is a continuous process involving the management, distribution, and preservation of information. A Records Management Officer can ensure that the program flows smoothly from one day to the next. Continuity and authority are particularly important because fractured responses to space and records crises too often result in temporary, haphazard solutions.

The Records Management Officer's job is varied and often

complex. The basic responsibilities of the position may include the following:

- **Inventory and Analyze Records.** Surveying and analyzing existing records is an important initial step in the records program. Inventory of records means checking storage areas and containers to determine what records exist regardless of physical format (paper, microfilm, computer tape, or disk), where they are located, what condition they are in, how old they are, and what information they contain. An analysis of these record holdings will indicate which ones are obsolete and may be disposed of; which are needed for current use; and, which have enduring legal, fiscal, administrative, or historical value and should be retained permanently.

- **Confer with Departments.** The Records Management Officer should confer regularly with colleagues and department heads to determine their records management needs. How long does the department or agency need a particular records series to conduct routine business? How often do staff refer to the files for information? Has the office retained files longer than applicable State Archives' Records Retention and Disposition Schedules, or the local government's needs require? How do officials dispose of out-dated information? The Records Management Officer and department heads should work together to answer these questions. The answers will help define how the records program should be implemented.

- **Confer with the Records Advisory Board.** When problems arise, or when the Records Management Officer has an agenda item for the Board to review, a meeting should be held. Situations may occur where the Records Management Officer will need the advice of the Board, or its assistance in gaining support for the program. Perhaps new retention periods are proposed for a record series not included in State Archives' Retention and Disposition Schedules. If the Records Management Officer is considering establishing a records center, the Board can advise on budget matters, procedures, and strategies for gaining broader support to fund the project.

- **Dispose of Unnecessary Records.** The Records Management Officer should encourage and coordinate the ongoing legal disposition of obsolete records through adoption and use of the State Archives' Records Retention and Disposition Schedules. The State Archives publishes schedules listing the minimum legal time periods records of local governments must be kept. The governing body of the local government must pass a resolution adopting the appropriate schedule. The Records Management Officer should maintain a list of records that have been disposed of, including the date and manner of disposition, as a legal precaution.

- **Propose Record Retention Periods.** Due to the diversity and rapidly changing functions of modern local government, new records are continually being created. Therefore, some records series may not be covered by SARA's Retention Schedules. The Records Management Officer, in conjunction with the Records Advisory Board, should develop retention periods for any records not covered by those schedules. The Records Management Officer should submit the proposed retention periods to SARA for approval.

- **Administer an Inactive Records Program.** A center for the storage of inactive records is an important component of a records management program. It is not sound administrative or financial practice to retain inactive or unnecessary records among those in current use. A storage area for inactive records frees expensive file cabinets and provides more space for those records requiring frequent referral. Information may then be found more readily. The Records Management Officer should work to obtain a secure area for inactive records that have not reached their minimum legal retention period, as well as find a safe area for the permanently valuable archival records. The value of an archival program is discussed below. Colleagues and department heads can assist with this effort, and the views of the Records Advisory Board should also be sought.

- **Establish an Archives.** Another important piece of the records program is the archives. Archives house permanently valuable records. Ensuring the survival of these records and the important information they

contain is the goal of an archival program. The Records Management Officer and the Records Advisory Board may work together to provide a secure storage area for records of permanent fiscal, administrative, legal, or historical value. These archival records have research value as well and tell us about events, people, and issues that have helped form our society, our past, and our culture. Archival records are arranged, described, and made available to the public, students, scholars, genealogists, and fellow government employees. Program staff should be on hand to assist researchers in finding the information they are looking for. State Archives' Records Retention and Disposition Schedules identify archival records created by local governments by assigning permanent retention periods to various record series descriptions. It is useful to publicize these rich cultural resources by informing other government officials, students, researchers, and the public of their existence. The skills of a government records archivist may be required to oversee this program or be closely involved with its coordination.

- **Coordinate Planning for Modern Office Systems.** The Records Management Officer should coordinate, carry out, or participate in planning for the development and analysis of government or agency-wide micrographics and electronic data processing systems, and should always be consulted before new information management techniques are implemented. Information created electronically merits special consideration in terms of storage and retrieval. If other offices are automating, the Records Management Officer should be involved in coordinating the effort.

- **Review and Advise on Requests for Equipment for Records-related Equipment and Supplies.** Equipment and supplies can be very expensive and should be purchased only after careful analysis confirms a need and a potential cost-effective contribution to a total records and information management program. Involving the Records Management Officer in reviewing and purchasing equipment and supplies relating to information creation and storage underscores his or her role as the principal official respon-

sible for information and records management.

- **Inform and Educate.** It is essential for the Records Management Officer to keep colleagues informed about records management techniques and the records management program. Workshops, manuals, and other publications can provide this valuable information. Promoting the program and educating local officials about benefits and results of the program helps keep the program visible and on course. The Records Management Officer can develop educational programs to present to staff and colleagues. Professional organizations also offer educational materials useful to the Records Management Officer.

- **Consult with Other Records Professionals.** The Records Management Officer should consult with SARA as often as necessary about any records concerns. The SARA is the first place to turn for help. Staff there are familiar with conditions throughout the State, and the SARA is the agency legally charged to provide advisory services to all local governments in New York State, except New York City. Professional organizations such as the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA), and the New York Association of Local Government Records Officers (NYALGRO) can also help. Addresses for these organizations are available by writing to the address on page 8.

- **Report Program Efficiency and Savings.** The Records Management Officer should report the economic advantages and the tax dollar savings which the records program provides to other government officials and the public whenever possible. Various public information tools, such as news releases, annual reports, newsletters, and the news media should be explored to publicize the records program.

- **Coordinate Grant Application Process.** The Records Management Officer should coordinate the development of grant applications to the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund

and other sources. The RMO should secure necessary guidelines and application forms, attend grants workshops offered by the State Archives and Records Administration, draft the application in concert with appropriate department heads, and ensure that the complete application is submitted on time. Where appropriate, the RMO should be designated as the project director and should be closely involved with the project. Applications to the Records Management Fund require the approval and signature of the Records Management Officer.

More Information

The State Archives and Records Administration has additional leaflets on topics such as writing an ordinance to establish a records management program and the role of the Records Advisory Board in the records management program.

The Local Government Records Bureau is charged with providing advisory services to all local governments in the State with the exception of New York City. Services include publications, articles, presentations, records retention and disposition schedules, as well as advice about microfilming, storage facilities, and automation. For further information, please contact:

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